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China's Opening to the U.S.:  
The Statecraft of Zhou Enlai

(Core Course I Essay)

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## Introduction

Zhou Enlai, who served as China's Premier from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to his death in 1976, was also in effect his country's top diplomat. Zhou, of course, did not make foreign policy by himself. Mao Zedong was the ultimate arbiter of Chinese foreign policy, just as he was of domestic affairs. Zhou's role was that of trusted advisor to Mao -- the indispensable chief minister who devised the strategy and tactics to implement the Chairman's foreign policy vision.

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This essay applies Deibel's analytical framework to examine the national security strategy, advanced by Zhou, that produced one of the PRC's greatest foreign policy achievements -- the opening to the U.S. of the early 1970's. This policy succeeded in meeting its main geopolitical objectives of countering the Soviet threat to Chinese security and breaking China's diplomatic isolation. Zhou's achievement is particularly impressive because of the weakness of the Chinese position -- in part due to self-inflicted damage stemming from the Cultural Revolution -- and because of the domestic constraints resulting from heightened factional contention in the Chinese leadership in the early 1970's. Zhou's realistic assessment of the world situation, his ability to set priorities and compromise on less important goals

to meet higher objectives, and his consummate diplomatic skills were key to his success.

### International Context

Fundamental to the Chinese decision to pursue the opening to the U.S. was their perception of major geopolitical shifts. The Chinese had concluded that the USSR's power was increasing and constituted a growing threat to the national security.

Sino-Soviet relations, once close in the 1950's, had deteriorated by the early 1960's as each side condemned the domestic and foreign policies of the other. This political conflict took on a military cast: the two countries reinforced troops along their common border, with armed clashes occurring there by 1969. The 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, justified by the Brezhnev doctrine of defending socialism in other countries, heightened Chinese fears of a major Soviet attack.

In contrast, the Chinese by the end of the 1960's had come to see the U.S., heretofore their main security threat, as a declining power. The Americans were bogged down in Vietnam and beset by serious problems at home. The Nixon Administration had declared its intention to withdraw from Vietnam and had signalled its interest in expanding contacts with China. The Chinese saw an opportunity to break down two decades of U.S. efforts to isolate China.

### Domestic Context

The Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao Zedong in 1966 to oust rivals in the Chinese leadership and purify Chinese communism, unleashed domestic chaos that weakened China's international position and undermined its ability to deal with this changing geopolitical environment.. Xenophobia seized China, and the nation drew inward. For a time, all but one of China's ambassadors were recalled. Notwithstanding Zhou Enlai's efforts to defend it, the Foreign Ministry, like other government and party organs, came under attack by Red Guards. It was not until 1969 that a semblance of normalcy returned to the MFA (reflecting the leadership's efforts to restore order throughout society) and Chinese diplomacy began to recover.

Rather than producing unity in the leadership, the Cultural Revolution left China's elite more polarized than ever. Factions formed around personal connections and differing policy prescriptions for advancing socialism in China. Underlying this factionalism was a century-old split between "nativist" and "modernizing" schools of thought on how China should respond to the challenge of dealing with the advanced countries of the West (Lieberthal in Harding, ed., p. 44). Nativists, who stressed the need to protect Chinese civilization, argued for a closed-door foreign policy and economic self-sufficiency. Modernizers favored greater foreign contact to achieve faster economic development and build a stronger, prosperous China.

Zhou Enlai, the leading modernizer, had to maneuver through this factional minefield to advance the policy of normalizing relations with the U.S. Zhou had the crucial backing of Mao Zedong to begin this process in 1970/71. However, Minister of Defense Lin Biao, Mao's designated successor, opposed the initiative because he feared his authority and that of the PLA would be undermined. Lin launched an abortive coup against Mao and died in September 1971 while trying to flee China. Zhou next faced the opposition of the nativist "Gang of Four" faction, led by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, who were angling to succeed the increasingly feeble Mao. The "Gang" criticized and obstructed Zhou's pragmatic foreign and domestic policies. Zhou's struggles with the "Gang" had become particularly intense by 1973 and lasted until his death in 1976, complicating Zhou's efforts to follow up on the initial opening to the U.S. in 1971/72.

#### Zhou's Assessment of the National Interest

Zhou's view of the national interest was focussed on the geopolitical -- on survival of the Chinese nation and the Chinese brand of socialism. The Soviet Union was a threat to both. Zhou logically sought to broaden China's diplomatic options by seeking normalized relations with the U.S. (Kissinger, p. 764).

Keith criticizes Kissinger for attributing Zhou's geopolitical realism to "an intuitive understanding of classical European balance of power" (Keith, p. 207). Keith argues that

Zhou did not seek equilibrium based on alignment with the U.S. but was acting on the basis of Chinese Communist united front tactics aimed at ensuring Chinese independence. Keith is right to suggest that Zhou's motivations were more complicated than simply maintaining a balance of power. But in the short-term, it is certainly true that the foremost of Zhou's united front goals was to achieve a balance between the superpowers. Over the longer term, Zhou aimed at replacing bipolarity with a multipolar arrangement in line with Chinese interests.

While geopolitical factors were dominant, Zhou's national security strategy also addressed economics. Zhou favored more pragmatic economic policies as set forth in his 1975 speech on the "four modernizations." He sought increased openness with the West to gain greater access to foreign technology. Zhou set the stage for his preferred successor, Deng Xiaoping, to advance the program of economic reform and openness, no doubt beyond anything imagined by Zhou.

Finally, while projection of values (ideology) was a component of Chinese policy, Zhou downplayed it in his diplomacy to avoid interfering with China's more important geopolitical objectives. Zhou told Kissinger to watch Beijing's actions, not its rhetoric; anti-American propaganda was "firing an empty cannon" (Kissinger, p. 776). He sought accommodation with the U.S. even while the latter was at war with socialist Vietnam -- further proof that geopolitics was more important than ideology.

Sources of Power

Zhou had to implement his policy from a position of relative weakness. China was a poor developing nation that could not match the industrial and technological capacity of the U.S., Japan, or even the Soviet Union. Adherence to a dogma of self-reliance had impeded economic development, and political movements like the Cultural Revolution created widespread economic disruption. Politically, China was just recovering from its own self-imposed diplomatic isolation and was beset by factionalism.

On the other hand, China's latent sources of power were considerable. Its size, population, and past greatness as a civilization gave China international stature unmatched by other developing countries. To far-sighted foreign businessmen, China was a vast potential market that perhaps one day might be tapped. Finally, while its conventional forces were technologically-backward, China did have nuclear weapons, and it had demonstrated during the Korean War its capability to defend its border areas.

Zhou's own mastery of diplomacy was also a great source of power. He was a consummate negotiator who won the admiration of Nixon and Kissinger for the depth and sophistication of his knowledge of world affairs. A skilled tactician, Zhou turned

China's isolation and the opaqueness of its political system to his advantage. The Chinese, skilled "barbarian" handlers for centuries, played on foreigners' sense of awe at the mystery of China. Kissinger himself acknowledged the danger of falling victim to "Middle Kingdom syndrome" (Kissinger, p. 735).

**Objectives and Plan of Action**

Diplomacy was the prime means at Zhou's disposal in implementing the opening to the U.S. Zhou set clear priorities among his objectives. These were:

- creation of diplomatic leverage with the Soviets to prevent any encroachment inside China's borders; ensuring that any improvement in Soviet-American relations did not come at China's expense;
- improvement in China's international diplomatic position which had been constrained by past U.S. efforts to isolate China;
- achievement of greater access to Western technology to spur China's development; promotion of an international environment that would allow China to focus on modernization;
- undermining of Taiwan's position internationally and bilaterally with the U.S.

Zhou recognized that China could not expect that the opening to the U.S. would produce the immediate end of U.S. diplomatic ties with Taiwan. His plan of action recognized that this would have to be a longer-term objective. Although the Taiwan issue was of great importance to the Chinese leadership, Zhou realized that compromise on this goal was necessary to meet China's top priority of countering the Soviet threat.

**Mission Accomplished**

Zhou's plan for engaging the U.S. accomplished virtually all of what was achievable. With regard to the Soviet Union, his diplomacy gave China a badly needed respite at a time of vulnerability. China avoided any major Soviet encroachment on its territory. Following the Kissinger/Nixon visits to Beijing of 1971/72, Japan and a number of other countries established diplomatic relations with China. The PRC won its place in the U.N. in October 1971 and defeated U.S. attempts to arrange a two China solution that would have allowed Taiwan to remain in the U.N. China's foreign trade began to expand rapidly; total trade with the U.S. reached \$1 billion by 1974. On Taiwan, the two sides agreed in the Shanghai Communique to a compromise formula (U.S. acknowledgement that the Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait believe there is but one China) that proved sufficient for the relationship to develop until the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979.

Conclusion: Lessons for the U.S.

Zhou, as statesman, offers much that Americans can respect and seek to emulate in the conduct of our own national security policy, even though we reject his ideology. The power of his personality, reflected in his skills as negotiator and in his keen intellect, made him an indispensable asset to his country. Zhou believed passionately in socialism, but these beliefs did not prevent him making rational assessments of the world's geopolitical realities. One can admire his ability to set priorities among competing goals and stick to them -- something we in our pluralistic democracy find difficult to do. Zhou was pragmatic enough to know when he had to compromise on lesser objectives to achieve his principal goals. As Kissinger suggested, Zhou the statesman had "the knowledge of what could not be changed as well as an understanding of the scope available for creativity" in his diplomacy (Kissinger, p. 781.).

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